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AUTHOR Stabler, John B.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an undergraduate political science course at Indiana State University (Terre Haute) entitled "Contemporary Political Problems." Current politics, economics, and social problems are emphasized. The underlying objective is to encourage students to participate in a knowledgeable and meaningful manner in the political process at all levels of government and in society. The course structure, its emphases, and examination information are provided. Four appendices contain sample quizzes, and tables are included. (JHP)

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PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

BY

JOHN B. STABLER

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Indiana State University
Terre Haute, Indiana 47808

Participation in the Political Process

Political Science 105 at Indiana State University is entitled "Contemporary Political Problems." A more apt title would be the title of this brief study-essay, "Participation in the Political Process." This course should not be confused with "current events" courses. The underlying objective is to encourage students to participate in a knowledgeable and meaningful way in the political process at all levels of both government and society in general.

Data showing a slightly over 50% participation of eligible voters in presidential elections and much lower levels for state and local elections, down to only a handful of people attending city council meetings is a sad commentary on our so-called participatory democracy. Such voter apathy it is hoped can be changed by encouraging objective study of our governmental system including a review of both its structural and functional weaknesses, as well as a review of current political, economic, and social problems. It is believed by such study and review students will upon leaving the class be interested in participating in the political process at all levels and hopefully encourage their peer group to do likewise.

The course begins with a short review of the structure and process of American government with special attention to current issues such as the role of interest groups and political action committees, party reform, government regulation, and Congressional restriction of presidential war powers. An opposing viewpoints reader including such controversial topics as school prayer, abortion, public welfare, Contra aid, and SDI is also studied.

Students involved in this study also subscribed to a college student weekly on current political and economic issues called the Today Journal. In addition students were given bonus points for classroom presentation of key points from

pertinent articles in the daily Terre Haute Tribune-Star and the Sunday Indianapolis Star. Further, PBS-TV's Washington Week in Review was shown every Monday and pertinent selections on contemporary problems were shown from the McNeil-Lehrer PBS-TV News Hour program.

The objective of this emphasis on current political, economic, and social problems using PBS-TV, current local newspapers, and the weekly Today is to encourage students to develop the habit of reading about current affairs from a variety of sources and to develop the habit of relying on the objectivity and greater detail of PBS-TV for TV news. It is generally believed that many college students do not keep current on political and economic issues or, if they do, it is through the medium of TV local stations and/or national commercialized TV networks and/or national weekly news magazines.

The purpose of emphasizing PBS-TV is not to denigrate commercial networks or local news broadcasts, but to suggest that in the case of national news PBS-TV permits much more detailed coverage. For example, the three network evening news programs provide only about 22 minutes of actual news coverage while McNeil-Lehrer actual news coverage time is probably over 56 minutes. McNeil-Lehrer normally has interviews with at least two opposing viewpoints while Washington Week in Review is an informal, unrehearsed discussion of current issues involving five experienced Washington correspondents.

The hypothesis for this study-essay was that over the course of the semester students would improve their skills in reading and understanding about current political, economic, and social problems and that such improvement would be reflected in their quiz scores. Students are reminded that in addition to the basic "who, what, when, and where" in news stories, what is really important is the "why" and "how." It is believed such an approach will develop within students the ability to read news stories analytically so real understanding can

be achieved. The quizzes are therefore designed to elicit the "why" and the "how" in the hope that students will develop this ability, thus improving their capacity for meaningful participation in the political process.

The data was collected in two freshman classes in "Contemporary Political Problems" in the fall of 1987. In Part I students were given a ten question/two points each entrance quiz on current affairs on the first day of class and a similar exit quiz as part of the final examination. Both quizzes were voluntary and "bonus" as they were additive to the total scores on other tests, i.e. there was no penalty in final grade computations if the quizzes were missed.

The questions were taken from the first and third pages of the three issues of the Christian Science Monitor prior to the quizzes as well as from the front page, the first page of the News of the Week in Review, and editorial and op-ed pages of the New York Sunday Times previous to the quizzes. Forty-four students completed both quizzes with an average mean improvement of 2 (4.5 to 6.5) and an average median improvement of 1.5 on a scale of 20. A total of 20 received the same score on both quizzes: 7 identical scores; 7 down one point and 6 up one point. Twelve scored 4 points or more higher, 2 of whom improved by 10 points each.

TABLE I Entrance and Exit Quizzes 44 students

# Students	Amount of increase or decrease between entrance and exit quizzes
2	-2
7	-1
7	same
6	+1
7	+2
3	+3
4	+4
3	+5
1	+6
2	+7
2	+10
44	Average mean improvement 2 points from 2.5 to 4.5 on a scale of 20. This represents an overall improvement of 10%

Part II of the study related to the 14 quizzes during the semester from the student weekly Today Journal published in Brunswick, Ohio. Today contained a compilation of articles from the Washington Post, New York Times, Christian Science Monitor, and other similar sources. A few questions were also taken from the PBS-TV program Washington Week in Review and from the Terre Haute and Indianapolis daily newspapers. Part II averaged the first three scores on the Today quizzes and the last three scores and related them. Fifty-five students were included in Part II and the average mean improvement was 2.7 (8.3 to 11) points out of a total of 15 points on each quiz. The average median improvement was 2.3 points on a scale of 15. Thirteen students improved an average of only one point while seventeen improved an average of three points.

TABLE II Today Journal Quizzes 55 students

# Students	Amount of increase or decrease between first 3 quizzes and last 3 quizzes
1	-1
2	same
13	+1
7	+2
17	+3
5	+4
8	+5
2	+6
55	Average mean improvement 2.7 points from 8.3 to 11 on a scale of 15. This represents an overall improvement of 18%

The above data is perhaps only modestly impressive and limited in terms of statistical significance. However, it does represent improvement. The real test, of course, is whether the students' interest has been piqued sufficiently so that after the class is completed they will have developed the habit of greater attention to the better resources for current news on political, economic, and social topics and will themselves participate in the political process and encourage others to do likewise.

Thomas Jefferson has often been quoted as saying in effect each generation should revivify the political process and society by a "little rebellion." His able biographer, Dumas Malone, did not view Jefferson as meaning a violent government overthrow, but rather changes deemed desirable by citizens through the experience of meaningful participation in the political process. Jefferson wrote in 1787:

> The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them. 1

Two additional points should be made about the research design. The entry and exit quizzes in Part I were both unannounced or surprise quizzes. Hence, possibly smaller improvement should be expected than in Part II. In Part II students were allowed to drop up to four of the 14 quizzes and use only their high ten scores in the final grade computation. Since a number of students had fairly high scores on ten of the first 11 quizzes, they may have been less than fully motivated in studying for the final three quizzes with resultant lower scores.

Note will be taken that both of the sample Today Journal quizzes in the Appendices contain a question asking for the interpretation of a cartoon. This has been an interesting exercise because sometimes cartoons are difficult to interpret or sometimes more than one interpretation is possible. Students are encouraged to question the instructor's interpretation and on some occasions their interpretation is judged more accurate or equally accurate.

1 Malone, Dumas, Jefferson and the Rights of Man (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1951) p. 158.

The following appendices should be self-explanatory. They are examples of the entry and exit quizzes plus examples of a Today quiz during the first three and final three weeks.

Appendix I	Entry Quiz
Appendix II	Exit Quiz
Appendix III	Today Journal Quiz 9/25/87
Appendix IV	Today Journal Quiz 11/27/87

APPENDICES

Appendix I - Entry Quiz 9/4/87

1. What is the "Bork nomination" and why is it believed significant?
2. What is the most recent development in the Iran-Iraq war (last weekend) and why?
3. Nixon and Kissinger said abolishing intermediate range nukes in Europe without a link to conventional forces is dangerous for Europe. Explain.
4. President Aquino's reaction to the military revolt last week was different than in the case of previous revolts both military and otherwise. How was it different and what are the basic problems in that country?
5. Why are the Democratic Party candidates for President in 1988 called "clones" and "dwarfs"?
6. Why were some Democrats upset over Senator Nunn's decision not to be a candidate for the Presidency? (The answer is not simply because he might win.)
7. What do you judge to be the two major problems in the Arias peace plan in terms of action to be taken by Nicaragua?
8. What was significant about the South African recent miner's strike in relation to earlier miner's strikes?
9. What are the two significant current problems of air transportation?
10. Comment on the headline "White House challenge to special-prosecutor law now in court." What is the reason for the law and on what grounds is it being challenged?

Appendix II - Exit Quiz 12/18/87

1. What is the Ivan Boesky affair?
2. President Reagan's former top aide Michael Deaver is in the headlines for what?
3. What is the current situation with oil prices and how is OPEC related to it?
4. What is the significance of Wednesday's election in Korea?
5. What is the latest development in the Democratic Party Presidential Candidacy race for 1988?
6. What is the "hard part" of nuke reductions yet to come?
7. What is the nature of U.S. criticism about human rights in the U.S.S.R.?
8. What will be the main way for both sides to verify the INF treaty?
9. The new Supreme Court nominee Anthony Kennedy has said what about abortion and limitations on privacy rights?
10. What was the nature of the Chrysler $16 million odometer fraud?

Appendix III Today Journal Quiz 9/25/87

1. Why have some feminists criticized Liz Dole for resigning the Cabinet to help her husband's campaign?
2. What is meant by the phrase "confirmation conversion" when referring to the Bork hearing?
3. According to Washington Week, what is the main reason for Russia making concessions on nukes?
4. Interpret the cartoon on page 4.
5. What was Madison's solution in the Federalist Papers to "overbearing factions?"
6. What is the effect of a different interpretation of the ABM treaty on the part of the Administration from that of a majority in Congress?
7. What is meant by the phrase noblesse oblige in regard to caring for the poor?
8. What particular issue allowed the Senate to invoke cloture to limit debate so a vote could be held?
9. What is a prime source of the political conflict in Nicaragua?
10. Is there any rationale in the Arias plan for Central America which allows government to government military aid but disallows government aid to rebels fighting one of the Central American governments?
11. What is the "constituency problem" regarding the "women's agenda?"
12. How is Howard Baker changing the style of Reagan's top decisions from the style under Regan?
13. State courts have generally reacted in what way to "living wills?"
14. The New York Times writes that Bork criticizes the Supreme Court for imposing what class values on American society?
15. Name one valid point ex-Prime Minister Wilson made in his ISU speech and why was it valid?

Appendix IV Today Journal Quiz 11/27/87

1. The Tower Commission took a different view of Reagan's management style than the Senate-House Committee Iran-Contra Report. What was the difference and give your explanation.
2. How is it that the Teamster's PAC is able to raise such large sums?
3. What does the Reagan Administration argue is necessary to move the Sandinistas toward democracy?
4. What is the essence of Reagan's policy toward Central America?
5. Why does the PLO object to UN Resolutions 242 and 338?
6. What is meant by the "good faith" doctrine in the matter of search warrants?
7. Explain the meaning of the statement that nominee Kennedy is more of a judicial technician than a conservative ideologue.
8. What position has Judge Kennedy taken on "comparable worth?"
9. Explain the criticism that the quality of American life is declining due to the ethnocentricity of our educational and scientific communities.
10. Interpret the cartoon on page 7.
11. Who does President Ortega refer to as the "sons of Reagan?"
12. Interpret the cartoon on page 5.
13. Representative Cheney (R-Wyoming) said that North did not break any laws. (True or False)
14. What failed in the Iran-Contra debacle -- the men or the laws? Explain.
15. What action is the Federal Government taking against the Teamster's Union?